



**Rene Saenz**

Oral History Transcription

November 13, 2007

Interviewed by:	Roy Saenz
Place of interview:	Unknown
Date of interview:	November 13, 2007
Approximate length of interview:	1 hour, 39 minutes
Transcribed by:	Allie Johnston, Intern, Civil Rights Heritage Center
Date of transcription:	May 2019
Summary:	Rene Saenz started as the Texas-born son of Mexican migrant farmers but developed a life in South Bend. In this interview, he describes his experiences in South Bend in the 50s through today, including his thoughts on La Casa de Amistad, the KKK, and Mexican and Tex-Mex interactions.

0:00:00 [Roy Saenz]: Civil Rights Heritage Center at Indiana University South Bend, South Bend Indiana. Interviewer: Roy Saenz, interviewee: Rene Saenz. Today's date November 13, 2007.

[Rene Saenz]: [I was a] Migrant worker

[Roy Saenz]: Okay, it's [inaudible]

[Rene Saenz]: In... you know in the early '60s when my dad could get up in the morning go to work with my dad in the field, picking cotton in the early morning because in Texas, the best time you could pick cotton is early morning.

[Music starts playing]

[Rene Saenz]: We will go back to the migrant worker and then we'll run into the story, you know.

[Roy Saenz]: Okay.

0:00:45 [Rene Saenz]: But the road mark for us in Texas, you know... We were competing at that time—our injustice—like the people from Mexico were coming because they would work for less money. You know, there was a problem. We were Mexicans, they were Mexicans too, but they think that they would do it for less money. And we did, you know, because... I mean, in a way I blame them, in a way I don't blame them. But they never seemed to—most of the people from Mexico—they didn't really move up in Texas at that time. They didn't really follow Chavez, [inaudible]. Because in Mexico they don't pay those people not even a dime, so they come to Texas and make 50 cents an hour and that's big money for them. So that's the only thing we would tell them. We never really got into fights. We tried to boycott them because, for example we would go to a farmer and he would pay us—to pick 100 pounds of cotton—2 dollars. And people would come from Mexico would do it for less money. That was a problem... in the 50s and 60s, you know. They were going to farms and they would do work for less money, you know but—

0:02:06 [Roy Saenz]: So where in Texas were you?

[Rene Saenz]: [inaudible] Texas, my ... I was raised there; my brothers were raised there too, you know. And back in the early 60s, my father and mother got sick, you know. So, I had to work in the farm, you know. I had to go... We used to hop in those trucks and just go out in those fields and work because there was no [inaudible], there was no food stamps or, no benefits that we got now. So, it was a different life. It was very—it was very nice because you work in the fields with those people that are from

Texas and Mexico too, and things started changing because they gave us a raise. They raised it to a dollar an hour back in the early 60s. We used to pick the first cent [inaudible]. One day I didn't go to school—one morning I didn't go to school, so I worked 10 hours a day for 7 days picking watermelons. And they gave me a check for 70 bucks. It was the biggest check, and they paid me that money and I took it to my mother, and she was so happy.

0:03:00 So that was it for us. It was one of the good things in the 60s you know and then, the migrant workers, you know, there was no work in Texas. So, my decision, when my mother and father got sick... My brother was young, Lupe and Roy they were really young. And it was, like I said it was really hard because we came into a new house, and there was no water, running water, no lights. We would just sleep in one bed in the winter time. My father used to go out there for some wood for the fire and bring it in to keep us warm. We used to go to the city for water, to take baths. Sometimes we would just go to the river. But it was a good life because all my brothers and my father and mother were alive, so it was.

0:03:39 One time this truck driver, Arnidez, and my older brother came up to Michigan and he told us there was a lot of work up there in the summertime [inaudible] So one summer, they were coming down here again, and they were coming to Ottawa, Michigan. So, I told my father and mother that we had to go because you know, we can't stay here no more, because there's no work for us. So, we all hopped in the trucks, there were two big trucks, all migrant workers got in the trucks. We came in trucks. As a matter of fact, we passed through South Bend back in 1966. And I was only 16 years old, you know. My father was sick, my mother was sick. So, in a way, when we passed through South Bend, I knew that someday I was going to live here. My brothers would stay here. They were going to die here too, you know? So, we came to Michigan as migrant workers. They were the best years of my life, In Michigan. We had a lot of time over there. We worked and were paid a dollar an hour at that time, you know. We were working picking cucumbers, apples, etc. But they were the best years because, to begin with, my brothers were alive, Lupe, Roy, Alvinio, and my whole family was alive.

0:04:40 We came up North as migrant workers to make a better living for us. But then we came in—well my uncle, uncle Raymond who was staying in Plymouth. He was a migrant worker too, but he settled down in Plymouth in the early 60s. So, he told us, 'Hey why don't you come over here and stay with us you know. And, we said okay—Then our uncle Rudy was set up in Detroit. He said, "Would you like to come to Detroit?" And I said,

"Well, I don't know. "So, I went to check out Detroit. But it was too, too wild in Detroit, so we settled in Plymouth, back in the early 60s.

0:05:14 But we stayed in Ottawa, Michigan for the summer. I think we worked, myself my brother and my mother. I think we worked for 18 months and we earned about 500 dollars, at most 550 all in a summer. And we bought our first car, when we came to South Bend. When we passed through South Bend, I see this red Nova car. And I told my father 'Hey look, that car is nice. It was a '64 Nova red convertible. So, when we came- when my mom went and picked me up when we came to Plymouth, that car was still there. So, on my way back to Michigan again, I talked to the guy, and we bought the car. We drove it back to Michigan, [inaudible]. I wasn't sure if we came back from Ottawa, Michigan to Plymouth for a little while. We did for three months or so. So, what I did, was stay here in South Bend. My mother and brothers didn't like it, so they went back to Texas. So, my... then maybe not even 6 months later, my mother and brother decided to come back to us. So, we stayed here in South Bend. And, at that time there wasn't that many factories that hired Mexicans. Or Tex-Mex, which is what they called us, you know. And... I was lucky enough to start one of the foundry commons there was a lot of... I think they were paying about 2.10 an hour at foundry commons.

0:06:32 [Roy Saenz]: Do you remember about what year that was?

[Rene Saenz]: It was 1967, 1967. 2 dollars and 10 cents was much better than 50 cents or a dollar back in the... working in the fields for that kind of money. So, I stayed here. And then another year went by. In 1969, I started working for Ally, you know. At that time, I think there were only... at that time maybe I wanna say about 10 Mexicans working there around that time in 1969, when I started working for Ally. And... we joined a UAW, United... Union for American Workers... UAW, UAW. And I was a member for 30 years there. And my brother thinks that he wanted to quit school—he was only 17. So, he told me one thing he wanted to do was get a job there. So, I said 'okay I'll get you a job there.' And I got him a job there and he was, when they hired him, he was so happy. You know he was only 17 at the time, Roy. And um, as a year went by—

0:07:38 [Roy Saenz]: How did he get his job if he was only 17?

[Rene Saenz]: I told Roy, I told him to forget his wallet at home. I said, "Don't take your wallet." When you go to personnel, just go up to the lady, just talk to her like 'Oh, you look nice.' She was kind of a heavy-set lady; her name was Michelle. She was a real nice lady. But just tell her how good she looks, and she'll go for it. So, and they viewed my records, so and we were lucky that they liked me. So, he got a job here. You know

because, he told them 'oh I forgot my ID' [inaudible] he started working. And two months later he was 18 so they couldn't say anything about it. But he worked [inaudible] and like I said to us... you know.

0:08:14 But during that time, when I worked for Ally, I was able to get a lot of people jobs there through the years. And this is not like in Chicago or other places, where a lot of Mexicans would take advantage of other Mexicans planning to charge them money to get them a job. Like in Chicago, back in the days, [inaudible] Back in the days, if you don't pay somebody \$400, \$500 they won't get you a job. Or you have to give them 10% of your check every time you got paid. That's how they get you a job in Chicago, back in the days. Here in South Bend, I gave maybe 100s of people jobs in that time. And still some of those families, you know, still stay here in South Bend, and still raise a family because Ally... was a good place to work. I mean they treat us fair. The plant manager down there was named Ray Cook. He was married to a Mexican lady, and he helped us to bring on justice for the Mexicans. He, he used to run a convenience store. But he was a very fair man. We would have a lot of guys from Studebaker, back in the days, that didn't like Mexicans, or Tex-Mex or whatever you want to call us.

0:09:21 So that's kinda... We used to fight, well not really fight but we used to really argue with them because they didn't want to give us the good jobs, they would always give us the dirty jobs. But as time went by, Ray Cook helped us a lot too you know, he was a boss. He was a fair boss. So really, we were more like a family there, you know, because he was married to a Mexican lady. And he was a very nice guy. You know and... through him, I was able to hire... I was able to hire a lot of Mexicans, you know, through him. Because I told him these people need jobs, you know. But besides that, you know... there were a couple times we marched downtown for Chavez [inaudible] at that time I was not a migrant worker no more. I did my share as a migrant worker back in the 60s. But that's the reason we left Texas, because there was no future on the fields. I mean it was fun, but there was no money, you know. You made 50 cents an hour and that ain't nothing. A dollar ain't nothing. Because you had no benefits, no sick time, you know so...

0:10:28 I was able to come up to Michigan, then like I said before, to South Bend... Yeah, I don't think there was much injustice for me. I don't think for a Mexican really there is up here... It's what you do for yourself really because... I don't really see too much injustice here in South Bend. I mean, they treat you the way you are really, I mean. I had no problems with the police, no problems with anybody. As long as you did your work, you know. Some people make it hard; some people want to make fights.

Like I feel sad for myself or whatever, you know. But I was lucky to work with a lot of Germans, Hungarians, and Polish. A lot of my friends are white and blacks, you know. But... it was nice, those 30 years I'll never forget Ally like I said went down in history and proud that we had our first president from the local, Ramon Rodriguez, [inaudible] and he was the very first president of the Local 5 back in the 70s. And he helped a lot of people too, Ramon Rodriguez. You know but... besides that, you know, we just... we worked on a lot of stuff, but we didn't really lead a lot of marching because most of my staff was working in the factories, we were working 7 days a week, 14 hours a day. We worked, you know, a lot. So, there was no time to march because I think I did my share in the past.

0:11:51 I mean, we helped a lot of people to get jobs here to get on the field because they would come around here, and they stayed in South Bend looking for better jobs. So, I would help my migrant workers to come to work with Ally. That's how I helped my cause. You know, some people say they think of that, but what I'm saying is once you help those people again, you know I'm grateful that they're still around, you know some of them are still living. But we did much here. I mean in the Latino [inaudible] and we bought the biggest bands from the whole country to South Bend because there was no entertainment for the Mexican Americans until then. We started in the 70s. Now it's [inaudible] but at that time there was no entertainment for the Mexicans.

[Roy Saenz]: What kind of bands did you bring?

0:12:39 [Rene Saenz]: We had... well most of it was Tex-Mex and some from Mexico, you know. We had the biggest bands in Texas. We had, you know, well, Ramon Ayabla, we had them, you name them. You know, La Mafia was in Texas. La Sombra, Selena. We had a lot of you know, Joe Brago, Freddy Martinez, Freddy Record from Corpus Christi. South Bend will go down in history as one of the capitals of the...we brought the music here to South Bend. A lot of big groups, they never heard of South Bend until the day I booked them. They say, "Where the heck is South Bend?" 'Well you said Notre Dame', well you know, that's where South Bend is, Notre Dame. It was really fun because people in Texas they would come over here especially the bands, and then [inaudible] we would start talking about the old days. They were talking about the music because I wanted to bring some of the big bands from my hometown, my home and [inaudible] bring them to South Bend. And I was able to in the 70s, and 80s, and 90s, we brought La Chola Amelia, Freddy Martinez, because he came there from Corpus Christi. We brought Joe Brago, Carlo Miranda, Carlo Hernan, San Josuna, and Selena when she was only 15. So, we had done. I mean I never did it for the money, we just did it for the music

because music is in the heart. My mother was a singer, my grandfather was a singer, my aunt was a singer, so it runs in our blood. My two brothers, Lupe and Roy, they loved to dance, and they were big dancers. And me, I couldn't dance for shit. But my brothers were good dancers. That's how we got involved... and the ladies too, we loved the ladies too, you know.

0:14:15 But mostly we wanted to bring entertainment to South Bend, because all the big bands were going to Chicago. But... there were people who would come from other towns, Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, just to see the big bands. They would come from all over. They say you build it, they come. And we were I mean... Me and my brother, we would put our money to music that first day and we lost. We had- [inaudible] in 1979. That was the big band we had. We lost our money. We... we tried to go with Lules but Lules didn't want to pay big money so I talked to my brother said hey, can invest some money, we give it a try. So, we give it a try, but we tried again thinking about music but, through the years I got to know different groups from Hartford, Michigan [inaudible] from Detroit and then [inaudible] from Chicago [inaudible] then we got bigger bands, and we brought them here. It was our dream, me and my brother, to have a dance hall, but it never happened. It was our dream to make a record shop in South Bend, it never happened. It never happened and he's gone already, but the point [inaudible] now just the memories of a migrant worker that we left Texas in trucks to make a better living and through the years I lost my brother here in South Bend. We promised, when we left Texas if anything happens to us, we're going to be buried in Texas, so I was able to take my brothers and my father and mother to Texas.

0:15:47 But um, South Bend had been great to the Mexican American because, when we came here there were no Mexican stores. There was nothing. [inaudible] back in the early 80s, the first Mexican store in South Bend, and now we are attacked by Mexican galore. And now, like I said South Bend has grown to... it's growing. It's a bit different. When you used to go down Western you didn't see no Mexicans, now I mean that's all you see now. It's our, our people you know, are seen everywhere you know. But um, I think we would be... to me my opinion for myself and my brothers, South Bend worked out... we were treated really good. I can't say anything about discrimination too much because I was never discriminated you know so I can't speak for others. But for myself, I had a great time. There's a lot of like I said, a lot of Hungarian, Polish, Germans Black people, they were really nice. I mean I thank the good lord that I worked a lot of places and a lot of people know me, Rene Saenz, and know what I had done for them. My brothers helped a lot of people, I helped a lot of

people, we still doing it. So, like I said, the tradition still goes on. But I can't say that we were discriminated, not us.

[Roy Saenz]: Were there any programs or anything, back in the 60s or 70s?

0:17:13 [Rene Saenz]: In the 70s there was la Casa de Amistad, and there was a couple of stuff that Tony... Tony Garza, [inaudible] Garza's father, started... And they were helping the migrant workers, people were helping... they were helping, but not... You know they didn't have too much money in the fund, so it's not like now that they help you with college, they can help you... they help you get a house, a small place. They helped, but the money wasn't there from the government... it wasn't like now. It was hard, but when we came here to South Bend, me and my dad, we stayed in a house with no electric, no water and we stayed in there, but it was cold. But I mean it was the best life, but... you know we suffered. I look at people now and they help with almost everything, I mean they didn't help us because we didn't know where to go. We were lost like now there are a lot of programs, if you know where to go, they will help you. when we came to south bend we stayed right there on Lafayette, on the corner of Lafayette. And I used to see people go to Ally, and I would head to the window, and I said man, I told my father I would like to work there someday, not knowing the next year I would be blessed to go work there. Because I would see them come through. Because we had apartment housing, it was a old house from the 1800s, I guess. It looked like the Herman Munster house. But it was so damn cold we had to go use the bathroom [inaudible] on Michigan street, and my dad had to go to the bathroom and there was no running water. We just stayed there for \$25 a month. But when we stayed, it was really cold. And we went through hell for the winter.

0:18:54 And then later, we were blessed because we met a family [inaudible] and the wife, Mary and they gave us a new apartment house upstairs. And we stayed there. But um, we didn't know where to go at that time. The programs, they were probably there, because I know [inaudible] had been there for years. But it's not like now when you come to South Bend, they keep you there. If I knew that [inaudible] I didn't even know where it was at. It took me years to find out [inaudible] that's where I work now, for the past 7 years. And um, I'm really the only Mexican there besides Jamie, and one or two of the Latino workers there now. but it was south bend it was a blessing for us you know. I mean, I feel sorry, I feel sad that um, you know that my brothers are gone, and my father. But... if I could go back in time some time, like I said, working in the fields in Texas. We used to go to work, it was happy moments, because they were alive. You know



and when we came to Michigan, like I said before it was... the life of a migrant worker it was really nice because in the afternoon, we would just sit down there play baseball we would just talk to each other and then just go back to work. And then you know... you know now it's changed. Now it's... everything has changed.

[Roy Saenz]: What um... you said baseball, you played baseball—

0:20:18 [Rene Saenz]: In Texas it was my dream to play baseball. But my father, well back in the 60s we were playing baseball and then my father taught me how to play baseball, his teams were the Dodgers and the Yankees. So I started playing baseball real young and then I went to try out for a team, and they told me that, they told me that I couldn't play baseball because they had a team already, so my father said, he said, well why don't you look at teams and we will... I will look at teams and we'll get some guys. So, we got the rejected guys and we formed a little team. And my father was my coach, our first coach to begin with and... I was playing third base and shortstop. And, we used to hop in the car we would put guys in the back seat, in the back of the... open the trunk, pop the trunk, we all hop in, in two cars and we would travel to another town and play.

0:21:00 We became so good, that the other team from El Paso, Texas, he told me father, say I want to take you guys to the, to the big leagues. I wanna go play with the guys that [inaudible], the other guys, but we have to organize your team and my team and pick the best players. So, I was lucky to get picked as one of the best players of the team. And we... come up as one team from two teams, we just one entire team. So, to make it easier, we used to travel in trucks to—to work, to play baseball. In [inaudible], Texas, I'll never forget it, when we got there there was [inaudible] but we got there were calling to us saying, they say, "Hey you spicks," and they would call a lot of names. And I wanted to get up and take a bat, take a baseball bat and break their mouths. But the coach would always say you beat them you won't play ball so go chill. But I'll never forget it because when we got there in the trucks, they were laughing and making fun of us, because all those guys had cars, we didn't have no cars and I was 16 too you know or 15 somewhere between there. We had no cars, we had bikes. You know we didn't have no money for cars. But most of those guys young kids, young white guys that had money, their parents had money, so I mean... we played ball. And then um, I wanted to play baseball, but I had to pick, I had to pick my family over baseball because if I was staying in —Texas... In the 60s I think that's right when my mother was going to die because the doctors. My father went to a hospital in Texas, and he couldn't get a medical exam. And he was losing weight real fast, and he was just laying down, just like he was... real sick. So, my decision for him to get well was

to leave Texas [inaudible] the weather and climate will help you, and it did. My father lived to be in his 80s. So, I made that decision. I could have run away and leave my brothers behind but... I could never do that. I could never leave my life.

0:23:00 So, I decided to work in the fields. I worked—I used to work in a bakery. And every month I wasn't getting paid, because they would give me bread and butter and cheese and eggs and tortillas so I would take them home for my brothers and my folks. So, for three years I worked there after school, and I would work from 5:00 to 11:00 at night. Saturday from 5:00 in the morning to 11:00 at night. And he didn't pay me, he would pay me with bread, and... food so I could give it to my folks. Because he knew, that my father and mother was sick, so he felt sorry for us. He didn't have to give me nothing. But he told me 'you're a nice person, taking care of your folks.' So... but... I helped my family when I was young that's the reason sometimes it was hard, you know... But it was the best years of my life when they were all alive. You know, people always bitch about money and all that. It's not all about money. But it was a lot of fun.

[Roy Saenz] Did you ever get the chance to play baseball later, when you came up here?

0:24:05 [Rene Saenz]: I tried here, but I was too much involved in work. You know but um, I tried out for that... team... I remember... in Studebaker's park. I could have made it... I think I could have made it to semi-pro, but it was... I mean... my little brothers they needed me more. I just couldn't leave them behind, so I just gave it up. We had a team, we had a team back in the 70s, I managed a baseball team... we had a ... we went to the Mexican American league. We formed a team, and we would play here in heritage park. There were a couple Mexican teams around the area. Baseball in the 70s... Our team was, of course, El Scorpion. [inaudible] We had, some good players. They were good, like my cousin from Plymouth, Ramon [inaudible] Junior. He had a trial with the Dodgers, but he turned it down to get married. And... they offered him 40,000 and he didn't go. But we had some good players in the 70s. But now it's mostly soccer, you know.

[Roy Saenz]: So, were most of the Mexican Americans, Tex-Mexs, Chicanos, were they all in this area?

0:25:24 [Rene Saenz]: Not really, they-they were all over. I mean, I go back in history, there wasn't that many around here they were mainly in Michigan. They would come for the summer for work and... they would go back to Mexico or they would go back to Texas. But when they realized there was no future in Texas or Mexico, they decided to stay here in the 80s. In the

80s they started come around the 80s. Because Mexicans would just come here for the summer Indiana. They didn't like the cold weather, but when they decide was it going to be our family or was it going to be the cold weather, the family or the cold weather? They had to stay here to make money. But there wasn't that many. Like in the 70s or in the 60s, in South Bend there wasn't that much at all like I said you know there was no Mexican stores, no Mexican restaurants, there was nothing. I mean we knew everybody here in South Bend, we knew everybody. How the numbers were low. Mostly-mostly in the 60s and 70s they were Tex-Mex. There was some people from Mexico, not that many. Mostly we knew each other here. They would come to Michigan, and they see Mexicans staying here so they just start coming in they were from Chicago. So, there wasn't that much back in the 70s.

[Roy Saenz]: Did they have recruiters or anything down in Texas to bring you guys up here?

0:26:47 [Rene Saenz]: Well they had... the recruiters really started as migrant workers. I mean all those people and the truck drivers they... The farmer would get... the truck driver. If you were a truck driver, they would get a percentage to bring people to come and work. They would work at picking cucumbers, picking apples, picking tomatoes, or picking whatever they had to pick you know. So, the recruiters was mostly the truck drivers. Because they had to bring the people here because half of those people had no cars to come this far. So, the truck drivers would get their own trucks put 30- 40 people in the back and bring them down, because not too many had cars and not too many know their way over here. So, it was mostly thanks to Carlo Ramirez from [inaudible] Texas, he brought us over here and he brought a lot of people. I go back to Grand Rapids and Muskegon, and Sagena and there's a lot of people stay there because of the truck drivers. And Carlo Ramirez was just one of the hundred truck drivers that would come up North. Mostly it was Tex-Mex drivers... they had the connection with the farmers. You know, because maybe he would get a dime or 15 cents for every hour, you know. Because they used to pay us a dollar an hour. So, the truck driver would get a dime for each worker. So, you multiply 50 workers or 75 workers at a dime or nickel an hour you ended up every day they worked, and he'd collect his percentage. So, he was doing pretty good.

0:28:18 So that would be our recruiter, you know. We didn't have nobody we'd just go get in and take off. Then if the truck driver would go back it would be your responsibility, or sure they have something to eat. You'd use the money; he'd lend you money and then payday would be a trap because sometimes you'd be broke especially when you come here. Before you

leave Texas, he will give you some money. The farmers like, I'll never forget Don Paul from Michigan—Ottawa, Michigan—a white guy. He would send money to Carlo Ramirez, a thousand dollars, and say look okay, we'll give all you people 2-300 dollars so you can pay your [rent, pay your water] or pay what you got to pay, so when you go home, everything's paid for. So that's how they do it you know they give the truck driver money so they could take care of his... Like my family who give money to whatever... you know so they could take care of the house. Or you can buy stuff, like new shoes or you buy whatever. And then when we come back here to work you subtract from the money, he gave you. And if you needed money along the way the truck driver would call to the farmer or the owner and say I need the money because they got a problem but, that's not what you would call a recruiter, I guess. You know but there was no recruiter for pay. Just a contact and you would go to Michigan... the truck driver was the recruiter.

[Roy Saenz]: What were the living conditions like on the migrant property?

0:29:42 [Rene Saenz]: Well, you see where on the picture I show you, it's just a little room from here to there. And there was no running water. It was like in Texas, what we had a Texas style bathroom. You go outside, no flushing water. We had no, really, we had no running water, no heat. Just a light you know. And it was... like I said... it was bad, but we had no choice than to work. We couldn't bitch. What were we gonna... walk all the way to Texas? Can't walk from Michigan to Texas... We knew what we were coming to. We knew like, okay we're not gonna be living in a mansion. It was beautiful because everybody knew everybody. You'd be out in the field working and singing along and playing with the food. Playing with... we'd play war with the tomatoes and the cucumbers; we had a lot of fun you know. And like I said I wouldn't mind doing that again. If I could go back in time, to me that was one of the best times of our life. Because like I said all your friends, some of them are gone some of them are dead but working in the fields and especially when 12 o'clock came and everybody would go to the truck and just eat your refried beans with tacos and potatoes and it was safe, you know. It was the best times, you know.

0:31:10 You hear people nowadays, and they're spoiled. Everything got to be hot, or they don't eat. Back in the day everything was cold, you would work, and you would get paid what you did, you know, and it was the best time of your life. You would have some tacos with refried beans some potatoes and just drink a cold pop, or coke or whatever, you know. Then go back to work you know. To me it was priceless, and it was the best life like is said before, my brother was alive when they were young, they were working

with us. And it was a beautiful time. I mean it was cold sometimes because there was no heat, but you would just wear a lot of clothes when you go to bed. All you had to sleep was your coat, or your working clothes and be ready to go the next day. because the truck driver would blow his horn at 6 o'clock in the morning and you had to be up to go work in the fields. It was wet picking those cucumbers. All your clothes was wet, because you would go working, and everything was soggy. We had no, we didn't have the right equipment to work, not like now you know. The rubber boots or the rubber gloves, and the shoes we didn't have all that stuff there. You know but... besides that, it was hard. But like I said nothing comes easy. But to me like I said it was the best, I mean, it was the best time of my life. You would go home and you, well my father was cooking 'cause he was sick. So, he would make a big pan of potatoes or beans together and we would just sit down and just makes some tacos and eat, and that's it. We had no refrigerator because, you know we couldn't afford one. So, we had everything you know, just, you know...

0:32:44 [Roy Saenz]: While you were working on the farms, did you ever boycott where you were working?

[Rene Saenz]: I mean I'm not going to lie. No, we never did that in Michigan because the farmers treated us was pretty good. In Holland, he treated us pretty good. There was some bad truck drivers, there was some bad... there was some bad... owners. But... I'm not going to sit here and lie about it. Because Mr. Harmon, rest his soul, sometimes had to pass through Ottawa, Michigan. and I was passing through South Bend. I was [inaudible] he was a white man but treated us the Mexicans really good. He was... there was no, there was no hate in his heart. He never took advantage of no body. He was good in here.

[Roy Saenz]: Had you heard of Cesar Chavez or...

0:33:33 [Rene Saenz]: [inaudible] He came to Notre Dame one time. We went to see him. I had the honor to meet him and we talked to him. But... like I said that was beyond my time. I'm not going to lie we boycotted a lot of stuff like A&P stores back in the 60s 70s you know. A lot of sidewalk posts like my mother but... some people would be selling stuff; we would buy stuff like it could be lettuce it could be tomatoes it could be... But um, I mean it wasn't that bad. I mean, I'm not going to sit here and tell you we had a big walking strike. We did more strikes for Ally than we did at the farms, you know 'cause they treated us pretty bad at Ally. You know we had to walk out, you know, but... You know we... boycotted at that time with a store called A & P, they didn't have any more stores around here... A&P, A&P, yes A&P... and... a couple of the marches we'd done. But besides that, I mean...

0:34:41 [Roy Saenz]: And those were all after you had gotten out of the migrant fields and—

[Rene Saenz]: Right, Chavez started getting stronger in the early 70s. So, I was already working for Ally, you know. All my migrant field years were already in the past. Because like I said—

[Roy Saenz]: Were there any racial tensions at Ally at that point in time?

[Rene Saenz]: There was... there was a little bit of discrimination because... like I said the guy from Studebaker, like the foremans from Studebaker, they didn't like us to talk Spanish... or Mexican or... whatever they called it, our language. Because they would say... you're in America and you speak Spanish, and I said, I would tell them. I used to piss them off, 'hey I mean you guys took Texas, took the Alamo, from my people. You can take my pride, but you can't take my language. I can talk any way I want to. You know but... we never really fought. There was mostly just you know—

[Roy Saenz]: verbal—

0:35:43 [Rene Saenz]: Yeah, and I would tell them and say don't make fun of my Spanish you know because I'll speak Spanish till the day I die, and that's the reason like I said. But mostly it was the older people at Studebaker that didn't like us talking Spanish there because they probably thought we were talking about them you know. But I said hey 'if we have something to tell you, we'll tell you.' As time went by, they realized that we were just workers with them, so they accepted us because they had no other choice. We were here to stay. We wasn't going to back off. I was lucky enough to be a union steward, a safety committeeman, and like I said I gave people a lot of jobs there without even charging them a penny. I could have charged them, you know 2-300, but I wasn't there for the money, I was there to help my friends and like I said before, they're still here, some of them are still here in South Bend. In matter of fact, Reuben Cabazo, he's the manager of the bank on Western Avenue, and he was one of my best friends [inaudible]. And he was a migrant worker too. He's another guy you might want to talk to. 'Cause... we used to work up in the fields.

0:36:47 We used to go sometimes when we would get off from Ally, we got—we went up to Michigan to trim leaves, for I think it was couple dollars too an hour. [inaudible] It was a hard job, very hard job, you know. And we would be cutting tomatoes, you name it. We did watermelons in Texas, you know from 5 o'clock in the morning, 6 o'clock. Till like I said... it was a lot of fun working in Texas. We would hop in a truck and go into the fields about 10-

20 miles out there. There was no running water, there was no restroom, we would just go behind a tree and do what we had to do then come back to work. You know, there was no bathrooms.

[Roy Saenz]: Now, did you come to the Midwest and started speaking English then or?

[Rene Saenz]: I was raised in Texas, man. I mean... the language in Texas is English and Spanish but mostly I speak Spanish because my mother didn't speak English, and my grandma didn't speak English so I would stick to my language, you know. In Texas mostly, 2000 people living there and half of them are Mexican. So, when you go to school, everybody is Mexican. So, what do you expect? You speak it a lot I remember teachers say, 'hey you guys speak more English' I said, "Okay, I will." Then I go home or whatever you know. But it was a lot of fun because we had divided—the city was divided the whites in one corner on one side of the track, the white children over here then the Mexicans over here.

0:38:16 It was fun because when we were playing baseball, we had... three white guys in each family that came and joined the team. We were the first Mexican team there in Texas in that little park. We had three boys who liked playing with us. And-and Mitchell Carter, I mean he was one of the best pitchers we had but... He was a rich- he was a rich guy. But he hung out with the poor people, we were the poor people, we were really poor. Because we had no water, no running water, no electricity, nothing. You know, but... he didn't care. I mean I always see him around. And Richard was another one. We had two guys that played ball with us. And... they like I said it was an honor for them to play with us because those guys weren't ashamed of us being Mexicans cause when we go to work- I mean to play another team he would go with us in the truck. He could've gone in his car he could've gone with his folks, but he chose to go with us. Because he knew that you know we were his friends. He looked to us as his friends he didn't look to us as Mexicans who had no money you know but... There wasn't that much... it was a lot of fun.

[Roy Saenz]: Was the- was the church a big role in like in Mexican life here in the 60s and 70s?

0:39:36 [Rene Saenz]: Yeah, I mean... I'm not gonna lie, I didn't go every Sunday, but my aunts and my mother used to go a lot. And... we were Christians we... It played a big part. We would wake up every morning pray to the good Lord, or night time before you go to sleep pray to him too you know... it's... very important being Christian. I mean, not only that but practice the word of being Christian. I mean anyone can go to church. Anybody can say they're Christian, or they care or they're religious but if

what- if how you say you treat people and what you do for them or what you can do for them. Or what thing you can do every day for them to- you know something you can do for someone every day. So, you can go home and say I did something good for somebody. Not because you want to get credit, but from the bottom of your heart. My father was that way, my mother was that way. So, I practiced through the years. And my brothers the same thing, you know. You can give anybody a dollar, give anybody a ride or take somebody somewhere to—and not charge them for gas. So that's being a Christian I mean... a church, or religious doesn't make a person. That's what I believe.

[Roy Saenz]: Was there a big difference in the 60s and 70s compared to now with the way that Tex-Mex looked at Mexicans or?

0:41:04 [Rene Saenz]: I believe, I believe the Mexicans, a lot of them, they don't like the Tex-Mex because they think that we want whites. They think that we're Uncle Toms. That we suck a lot of ass with the white people or black people. It's not that, I mean my friends are white. I got a lot of friends that are white. Matter of fact, my best girls—or my girlfriends were white. My friends are black, see I'm in the middle. So, they see the Mexicans—because at that time since in the '70s, before they got educated here in South Bend or went to school, they didn't speak that much English. So, they would see me talk to the white guys and they didn't like that. Like 'hey, he's sucking his ass'—excuse my language. You... 'you're Uncle Tom.' I mean cause, when I came to South Bend, [inaudible] around Bonnie Doon's it was like Happy Days. I was mostly the only Mexican here. And God knows that I was treated—I was invited to a lot of parties to a lot of houses. Me and this guy named Benny-Benny Fuentes, he's still around. And Benny was a Tex-Mex—he was a Tex-Mex, and he took me around. And the white people treated me more better than the Mexicans really because... some of the Mexican people they see the Tex-Mex different.

0:42:18 They forget about one thing, that we opened the door for them, for them to be here. If it wasn't because of us Tex-Mex that we came here in the 40s and 60s and 70s they wouldn't be here. So, you know it's very... I don't have so much respect for a lot of them, because they look down at us. Like we... were more with the white people. It's not that. I treated them the same. Black, white, Mexican, whatever. However you treat me, I'll treat you the same way. But there is, and even now right now- even now right now. I mean, you can go to the store, you say 'wow' you know, you see people from Mexico, and other countries and they look at us and know we're Tex-Mex. They don't say hi to us. You know, some are friendly, and some will some won't. But it's the way they are. They're not gonna



change. You can't change those people. You know, it's a pity, it's a bitch, that they think that way, but I tell you, that's the way they are.

[Roy Saenz]: Do you think... the whites and blacks noticed the difference between Tex-Mex and Mexicans or did—

[Rene Saenz]: They didn't you know—

[Roy Saenz]: Or did it see it all as, you're all Mexicans or?

0:43:24 [Rene Saenz]: Well, a lot of the whites see us, they realized... the way we talk, the way... they understand who's the what they called the 'taco bender' who the 'spick', or who the 'Chicano', or who the you know... I guess ever since the movie Selena came out, a lot of people realized [how Selena's family talked], Selena in the movie. You know, the Tex-Mex were in the middle. The Mexicans don't like us because we don't talk their language. And the whites didn't like us because we don't speak their language too. So Tex-Mex, we were in the middle.

You know so, I say there wasn't that much discrimination, you know cause like I said before, to me I haven't been discriminated by the white guys at all. I've been to a lot of places, I've been to a lot of bars, I've been to a lot of parties and I haven't ever been discriminated against. Like 'hey, you can't come in because you're Mexican', you know. I mean... you know I've seen more discrimination with my race, against us Tex-Mex, than what I see with the white people against the Tex-Mex. And I can say for almost 40 years since the 60s and... I have—I got a lot of respect for the white people and the black people in South Bend, you know.

0:44:37 [Roy Saenz]: With the new wave of immigration into Elkhart, Goshen, in uh... a lot of um... those folks who are from Mexico... what is what is kind of the census of like... assimilation or are you familiar with the words assimilation like, or holding out to the culture?

[Rene Saenz]: Well I mean—

[Roy Saenz]: —or giving up the culture?

[Rene Saenz]: No, I don't think—

[Roy Saenz]: Is there a difference or?

[Rene Saenz]: I don't really... I believe that I mean... I—I'm proud of my ancestors. I'm proud of my uncles, my great uncles, my grandfather. They fought with Pancho Villa, we're Mexicans by law. I mean, my ancestors have loved the Mexican music, and that's in me. I mean but I think we

should stick to it. But you know, but we have to remember one thing we have to respect we are in the United States. I mean I think the American flag counts for the Mexicans and the Tex-Mex. I disagree with a lot of people in Mexico that you pass by the house, and they got the Mexican flag. To me I think that's not showing respect for the Americans. Because this country was made by a lot of people... from different countries but still remember one thing this is the United States. So, this is why... I mean I don't like some of the people from Mexico or other countries they always, they want to put their countries first. But I believe if they like it so much, they should go back to where they come from. Because they shouldn't be bitching about it. If you don't love the USA, get the heck out of here. That's why I'm against it. You know, and I'm against a lot of things that... that we pay taxes, all people taxes, we all pay taxes, and I don't believe, some people could get away with murder.

0:46:40 You know, cause nobody helped my folks when they were sick in Texas, there was no program for them. There's a lot of programs, there's a lot of programs for other people coming into the country, and then we got to pay their... I figure, if I can work in the fields for, when I was 16, 14, 13 years old, they can do the same thing now without paying them, but a lot has changed now. But there was no law then. You got to be 16 to work in the fields. Back in the 50s, you could work in the fields when you were 11 years old, you could be 10 you could be 9 there was no... like now you know, people are now more... you know... but things have changed.

You know, I disagree in a lot of ways if they put their country before the United States. That's my belief. I mean, that's true it could be an amigo thing, it could be a Tex-Mex thing, fine. But don't forget who supported our ass, who saved your face. You know I'm proud to be from the United States. You know they say you're Mexican, yeah, I'm Mexican but I was born here. I mean I'm a documented Mexican, but they were wrong I'm proud of my... my background. And I tell them, 'hey'...

0:47:49 But you know, some people like I say, they're always like, 'I'm from Mexico'. Who cares if you're from Mexico? You're from... whatever you know. I mean, I feel in this country, people fought for us. My ancestors fought, you fought yourself. A lot of people went to war to get our freedom. There's a reason, you know we should be. I have, I fought, but most of the other guys, they say I'm a white lover. I say, 'why? Because I love the United States? It's my country. Not Mexico, not Texas.' Well Texas... you know. I tell them, 'hey I'm still a citizen.' Like I said I always tell them to kiss my butt, you know. I'm not saying all of them are that way but some of them that way. And now, you know like I said, I don't care who knows my

views, or whatever. That's the way I feel. You know, I don't want to ramble.

[Roy Saenz]: Are there... are there a lot of differences in Latino cultures here in the, Michig- in the Midwest?

0:48:56 [Rene Saenz]: Well, when I came here, the word Latino... it really pissing me off, but I don't use it myself, but that's my opinion. Or at least when I'm talking, we always say I'm a Chicano, I'm a Tex-Mex, and now they hate the word Latino. Hey, I'm not a Latino, I'm a Tex-Mex, I'm a Chicano. I'm a proud American. I hate that word and I hate to use that. I mean, Latino, Latino. If you look around at all the advertisement, where do you see Tex-Mex? Never. Where Chicano music, never. Only Latino, Latino, Latino. You know, I'm up to my neck with that Latino word, you know. And whoever came up with that idea, I mean maybe... I think... whoever uses it is bitter because there is so many people from different countries maybe to them it's just how to use it. You know it's like... For example, I can say take the Germans, the Polish, the Hungarians. You don't need, you know, a word for them. But they're all white, you know. So, the Latinos here, you're Puerto Rican, or whatever you are it's a Latino now, you know. You know, I like to be called what I am. I don't want to be called Latino. You know, I'm a Chicano, I'm a Tex-Mex, I'm an American—A Mexican American. That's what I like to be called. I disagree with whoever came up with that-that idea. They should take him out there and shoot him or whatever, you know.

[Roy Saenz]: What about the word Hispanic?

0:50:22 [Rene Saenz]: Well... well, they use it too I mean... I don't like it; I mean that's my opinion. You know that's just me you know. I mean, just name the person whatever they are. I mean it's... Because you know it's like what I said... I guess whoever came up with those easy words, it's you know... It's like... it's just weird. It's like... back in the 60s I was just passing the restaurants, and they... and I said tacos. And I remember in Texas, the white people used to look at them [inaudible] because we eat tacos, tacos and beans or peanut butter with tacos I would take to school and sometime I would break them and they would break, not knowing they were going to make the white people rich from making tacos. They used to laugh at us because we ate tacos. But like I said you know it's just an idea. Whoever thought that tacos would make big companies millionaires.

You know... the word Latino, Hispanic or whatever you call it, you know I... it's just weird, I don't know. I don't like it; myself I don't like it. A lot of people like it, but not me. I just want to be called really... Why does it have to be a title when you get pulled over? Why do you have to... to brand a

person? If they pull you over, I'm just saying his name should be enough. Not Mexican, like 'hey there's a Mexican here'. Just name him by his-by his name. Rene Saenz, that's it. You know, maybe the Saenz name confused a lot of people because in the 60s a lot of white people thought my last name was white because I was dating a lot of white people. And they see Rene Saenz and then when they get to know me, they say oh, you're Mexican. Their parents thought I was mixed. Because Saenz is-is... you know I'm not bragging or, but you know our name Saenz, you know it's different than Martinez, or Alsadez or Trujillo, or Perez it's just... it's not a really... you know if you look in the dictionary or what I had done when I came to South Bend I looked in the phone book and I was calling different Saenz to see if they were my cousins from Texas and I called different places and they were white people. I say Ms. Saenz, are you from Texas? Oh no.... A lot of them, you know they're white. You know so... our last name is weird. You know, I'm proud of our last name because [inaudible]. But Saenz, it doesn't sound that Mexican. I'm not saying that... that I want to sound like Mexican but it's just always Saenz, you know... so...

[Roy Saenz]: Let's take a little break for a second.

0:53:15 [Rene Saenz]: I'm not knocking the Mexicans from Mexico. Maybe they didn't fought for their rights because half of the time they didn't understand the language. The white farmers who talk back who talked back to them, and they just keep nodding their head. I feel sorry for them because they didn't understand. That was the case when I was up in Michigan. You know I was working, and I think it was about 10 miles from where I was staying at, where the farm was at. And a white guy told me to do something, get some pipes and he wanted me to carry, instead of carrying two he wanted me to carry five or six at one time and they were heavy. I couldn't, and he tried to put me down. Talk to me like, 'you work for me now', etc. etc. I say you know what, to hell with this shit. So, I threw the pipes and I walked 10 miles back to the camp. Because he was treating the other Mexicans real bad because they didn't know what he was talking about. This was the only injustices that I had seen that the poor people I mean, they were treated... the white guys the farmer the white farmer, I don't remember his name, but he was an asshole. He was treated them, those guys bad. And I would tell them I would say he's... he's treating you like shit, man. I would tell them. And they told me they had no choice; they needed the money. I said I don't need the money that bad.

0:54:35 So, there was different, our languages they wouldn't understand when they were talking to us, bad. You know they think, a lot of farmers back in the day they thought because we were Mexican, we were all alike. We are alike, but we are different. We understand the language. Being from a

place in Texas and going to school in Texas, so we knew what the heck they were talking about. So, there were cases that we walked. We would walk from—we left the farm twice. I wasn't gonna kiss their ass for a dollar an hour. You know, because what they would do during that time—the farmer was smart, so they could keep the people working for them the whole summer. They give you a nickel, a dime. They say we're gonna pay you a dollar, but we're gonna keep—we'll pay you a dollar ten, but we're gonna keep the 10 cents when, for when you complete your two months working for me. We'll go back and pay you for that time, what 40 dollars not even 40 dollars a week they keep in dimes. But at that time, they would try to treat you like shit. Because what, they say a dime is a lot. It's not a lot. Not enough money for them to—to put you down.

0:55:56 But the only difference—mistake that they'd done, they didn't understand that the Tejanos, not just me there were a lot of other Tejanos too, that would fight, would say 'hey don't talk to us that way', because we understood the language. They told us wetbacks, they called us wetbacks at the time. Wetbacks, because of the border. They say you cross the border you get wet; your back is wet. They would call us... you know that's what they would call us. There were a couple of times, when we would go up to Ottawa, Michigan, and we would be in the trucks and the white boys would call, "Hey you wetbacks! You Mexicans!" All that shit. So, we get the tomatoes and we throw them at them, you know. And with me being a baseball player, I hit a couple guys in the head you know. They call the police but the owner, Don Paul was the owner, he'd call say they don't give them a ticket, don't file no charges. I'll pay for the damages, you know. But they... they would push us, the white rich people... they would look down at the Mexicans and they thought we didn't speak English. They forgot we were from Texas. So that's why I'm saying I don't like the word Latino nowadays, or Hispanic whatever you know. You know, I never did like it.

0:57:07 There was a palabra for la causa, they called it the case... Chicano, Chicano Power, back in the days. Chavez taught me that, back in California. The word [inaudible] became Chicano, and from Chicano, California, you know. But like I said that was the difference, only difference there were a lot of farmers that would look down at the Mexicans and they would look down at us. But not knowing that they would talk for us. You know, where'd you learn English? What's your language? I mean, at school, stupid, you know. That was the case one time, when I was having a dance in the 70s and... there was a lot of Mexican people from Mexico. And the police that were working for us he didn't know I was the promoter. Say 'man you speak real good Spanish, where'd you learn it from?' I say, "I'm Mexican." He say, 'you're Mexican?' 'Yeah', you know. Because he

talked half and half. You know it was for fun, he goes 'hey, man you speak Spanish real good'. Where'd you learn it?' And say, "I'm Mexican too, man." I don't know if the guy was [inaudible]

0:58:13 But we had a lot of good... I mean working in the fields to me was the best I mean I appreciate Ally, but there was nothing like working in the fields, getting up early in the morning. Like I said before you know eating tacos or whatever. Or we would just open a can of beans and eat it with a fork you know that's it. Or tuna, or sardines you know and just eat it with a cracker and go back to work. That was part of being a migrant worker, you know. Sometimes back in the early 60s in Texas, I would hop in the truck and there was no food. I mean, there would be no food in my house, so I didn't take a lunch. And I thank the Mexican people from Mexico, cause they would look at me and say, 'hey you gonna eat boy?' And I would say 'no I'm not hungry'. Say, "You don't got no food?" "No, I got no food. Don't worry about it." 'Come on, come and eat'. They would give me some tacos. I mean we had a lot of good people from Mexico. They used to call them mojados... Palasedos, is the word. They would stay in a little camp, in the back of a house. And they would play the guitar and you would sing along. After working all day, they would cook. And then there were a lot of good guys that could cook from Texas. When me and my brother were little, we used to go eat with them because they were really nice to us. And... there were a lot of people from Mexico, they were very good people but then we got some bad people that don't like the Tex-Mex, you know. But most of the people that we would work with they were good people, you know but... [inaudible]

0:59:45 [Roy Saenz]: I think that's the first time I have ever heard you not...

[Rene Saenz]: not what?

[Roy Saenz]: not have words to say. You've been talking for an hour. But that's good, that's good. What- tell me about... tell me about the family. You said... the family fought with Pancho Villa?

[Rene Saenz]: They fought with Pancho Villa. They were what you called skuts, like ... what do you call them ... like they were called—from—like—like—they would see if the if the enemy was in the front lines you know, and they would come back and tell Pancho Villa what they were hiding. And there were two, a father and a... it would be the father and the... the father and the son together. La Rafaeles. They got a song—I don't know I would like to find it someday, in Texas or in Mexico. They made a song, Orelo. Because in Mexico, it's a Mexican tradition you know if you're badass, or you're a good person, or you're a fighter they would make a song. Mexicans are always gonna make a song about anything. So, when

you're famous or you fought, or you know you killed a couple guys and you're badass they wrote a song. And they wrote a song about them because the way they killed my great granddaddy and my great great uncle, they were sleeping. They didn't give them time to get the guns because they say if we give them time to get up, they will shoot us. They were bad. They were bad with guns. So, they were camped while sleeping and they shoot them down like dogs. They made a song. La Rafaeles, but they fought with Pancho Villa. You know, my grandmother always kept her gun holster, or whatever you call that. For years I used to ask what is that for grandma? She said that used to belong to your great granddaddy, her father. Cause, they kept it, a souvenir. But they fought with Pancho Villa. So really, like I said a lot of people you know they say hey you're from Texas, you're a whitey. I say no I'm Mexican 100%. You know I'm 100%.

1:01:38 We love the corridos from Texas and Mexico. We love the music. As bad as some of the people from Mexico they are like, 'I don't listen to Tex-Mex.' But I love my music. I love all the things from Tex- Mexico back in the 50s, you know. Our little town—I lived in a small town, you know, and most of the people that are working in Texas they were migrant workers because we... we would work in the fields, picking cotton and working in the fields. My... working with—I think it was people they had a mill and they hired people to... what you call it... cow to [inaudible] the machines, and everything. So mostly really Elsa was a town for migrant workers because during the summer they were all migrant workers because they would come from Mexico and stay there in houses, and work in the fields. I mean It's so beautiful when you see 1500 people working in the fields. And some beautiful women out there too you know, Mexicanas or Tex-Mex ladies working in the fields you know. They would put their tight jeans on and work all day, you know. It was a lot of fun.

1:02:38 The only part that wasn't fun that we had to go to the bathroom you had to go hide somewhere so nobody can see you. Because they had to go, you know number two. There were no McDonalds, there were no restaurants. There was no... those portable bathrooms. They didn't have them there. There were no bathrooms like that. You know, so we used to... we used to hide, or we had a guy watching, make sure nobody's coming cause I got to go.' So, we would go and clean our butt with—like my grandfather used to say we in Texas we had no toilet—we had no tissue like now you know. In Texas we just pick up an old newspaper, take the dirt off it and clean your butt with it. You know my grandfather used to say when we were little, he had a saying don't clean your ass with newspaper because your ass can't read, you know. It's true. But we didn't care we didn't have that stool-squeezer Charmin. But I came to South Bend—I would go to a store and see the people, smell the toilet... toilet tissues and say, "Why they

smell that shit for?" You know, they ask me, "Why they smell that," and say it's not gonna smell good. In Texas, you pick up a leaf or you pick up some dirt or pick up some cotton and clean it then go back to work. It was a fun part of life you know.

1:03:57      There was a driver, that would go around—my father before he got sick, he would make snow cones. He would go to the bakery and buy some bread and some cold ice and a scraper and make some ice cones. He made his own soup, or whatever you call it his own... flavors, strawberry, or banana flavor, and we would sell them for a nickel. I would go with him; I was little when me and my brothers we would go with him. And he would go to camp to camp and he was selling them for a nickel, snow cones, you know back in the days. And bread for a nickel—bread. That's how he would make a few bucks you know. When you buy two dollar, you buy a dollar a guy from the bakery would give you two, four, five pieces of bread free so you can make a profit. If he could make two-dollar profit during that time for him that's a lot of money. Because gasoline was only what, 60 cents a gallon, back in the days. With one dollar you could run the whole neighborhood there. And... he used to as a migrant worker, the trucks who would take oranges too, so what he—my father would stay and take it to those people. And... sometimes he would take some oranges... it was against the law, but you had to do what you do. And take all the oranges when nobody was looking, to survive. Take it to a food stand and sell them too. And my father was a very good-looking man, so he knew how to charm the ladies. You know, it runs in the blood- Saenz. So, he would go and say look I got so many oranges, they're great. Would you buy them? And he sold them. And it was against the law, but it was the way to survive, you know. Because we had to do what we had to do.

1:05:42      Then my father got sick and all the responsibility came on my shoulders when I was about 11 years old. There's a reason I never finished high school I never got an education because I had to—for all those years, in the fields. It was for my family. I would do it again if I had to. Because I could have said you know hell with it, I just run away. And my big—my big brother Alividio, he ran away. He couldn't deal with being so poor. Oh 'we were so poor.' We had no running water. We had no refrigerator. We didn't know what turkey was, we never had turkey. We never had a Christmas tree. We never had—the only Christmas tree was when people threw it away, we would take theirs and take it back home. So, we never—we missed, but it's not so much that we missed those holidays. It's—but we were together. You know, celebrated in different ways. My father would get up on New Year's and make some... [inaudible]. It was our tradition. My father would make you know—or he would go to my grandmother Saenz, and whatever was the leftovers he would bring them to us. You



know we were never really... a family that would get together now, and have a big Thanksgiving dinner, and a turkey or ham. We never had that kind of—you know because we were so poor. It's like I said I only had two pair of pants. I had to wash one and wear the other to work or school the next day. And sometimes like I said I worked in a bakery and I smelled like bread because I couldn't take a bath because there was no water at home. So, I would go to school the next day and they called me "un panelo" because I smelled like bread.

1:07:12 And I was 13 or 14 years old, you know. But I knew that I had done [inaudible] everything for my brothers and my mother. And Lupito was young, Roy was little Roy was very little. I used to carry, I used to... There was this case one time we were going to school. And there was... there was this ditch. And they told us the school teachers, don't go through there because you can drown there. You need to go around. And we were late, so we crossed the pipe. And I had Lupito on my back and I had Roy in my hands. And I walked into that across that pipe, and I fell down. And we all got so dirty. So, when we went to school, they took us in and instead of giving me a talking to, they spanked me. And say you shouldn't have endangered your brothers lives on this. I said 'hey we were late so we—' you know it's the thing we had to do. You know case they were little Roy and Lupito were there when they spanked me. But they done it to teach me a lesson not to endanger their lives, so I never did it again.

1:08:13 But like I said before, you know we were so ... it's a migrant worker. Really it was our lives, were really really poor in Texas. That's the reason we left Texas, because there was no factories, there was no jobs there. But it was a good decision, I made a good decision, because my brother died there. I don't know if its... I'd probably have to do that all my life. But at the moment, I had to make the right decision for my family you know. But it was a lot of fun traveling in the trucks, man. Like in the movies coming from Texicano. They told us not to let the sun catch us, us Mexicanos, because they were worried about the KKK. But the KKK they weren't worried about us Mexicans; we were migrant workers. They needed us in the field. They didn't mess with us, I mean, they might mess with other people, and hang them. But we were blessed you know—I didn't—. We seen them, but I never, myself I wasn't too trained. I wasn't too sure what's the KKK back in the days. Because in Texas they never taught us of the history about the KKK. There was no hate. So, it was all new when I came to South bend, or Michigan. You know the KKK. I mean I'll never as some years went by, I got to meet some of the KKK, but they never messed with me. You know in Ally there were a couple of guys that were members of the KKK, and they liked me in most cases they never really messed with me. As a matter of fact, I was invited to some of their

parties, I didn't go but what I'm saying is that coming from Texas in two big trucks it was a lot of fun.

1:09:4      You know I look back and wish I had pictures. I brought a couple pictures. They're what you've seen before you know. They're from when we were up in Michigan, in Ottawa, Michigan—the camp. I mean I was there this summer. They took everything down... all the little houses they had for us; they're gone. Migrant workers is a thing of the past. They got machines now for everything. you know back in the 60s I used to go, when I would stay in South Bend, I would go to every year up to Ottawa Michigan, just to see my friends working in the fields you know... now they're gone. All those workers are gone. A lot of people suffer as a migrant worker, a lot of strikes, a lot of fighting, I guess. But... in my time there wasn't too much fighting because they treated us good. It's—I think we were blessed with the farmers that were with Don Paul from Michigan, he was a very nice guy. You know, I was blessed. Our family was blessed.

1:10:39      And here in South Bend like I said before there was a couple strikes, we had done but no hunger strikes you know not like Chavez. He suffered, he got sick and he died from that. He is the man I idol and too bad they don't honor him with a day in history like Martin Luther King. They should honor him with a Chavez day. Because he is the only Latino Chicano that I can recall that John F Kennedy, Rob F Kennedy look up to, you know. He was a man like Martin Luther King. They were four famous guys, four great guys. You know Chavez, Robert, John F Kennedy back in the 60s, you know. He did make a big difference he fought but we can't forget just him, it was Johnson that took over after Kennedy got killed. He took over [inaudible] Latinos or the migrant workers because migrant worker, it's not just only Mexicans. There were blacks there were whites too. They were country boys. They worked side by side with us too. We can't just say the Mexicans no. I mean I would work with my brother up in Michigan with a bunch a lot of white guys up in Michigan, in the fields with us, and black people too. But we can't just say the Mexicans. Sure, the percentages was bigger because they had come from Mexico. But they would like I said when I was little, we would come up to El Campo, Texas when I was a baby. And my father met a couple of black people, and they were always close. You know we were always close. Because they made me follow the rules, with black people they were staying in the same house we were staying. There was a black couple staying in the same house we were staying. But the history of migrant workers, is equally with everybody to me. We cannot forget the white people and the black people that worked too you know because it is part of history.

1:12:29 I was happy I was part of being there and seeing it and living this long at 57 because like I said my brother Roy was 25 when he got killed. Lupito was 18 when he died, he never seen what I seen. You know a, brown beautiful girl alive, to buy a house and for them to get married. You know Roy was blessed with you; you know he had a son. But he never got to see you play ball, he never got to see you play anything. I know he would be proud. But what I'm saying is migrant workers, there was not many strikes at all not around here. I'm not here to lie about my background, because I'm not a liar. I was grateful that I worked in the fields for 50 cents, and up to a dollar. Then we came up to Michigan and we passed through South Bend and I know like I said before I would stay here someday. I mean, I was taught on Notre Dame, I would say I'm going to play football for Notre Dame, but I didn't. At least what I got to see was you, to gain from Notre Dame. And now, the Latinos they come here to Notre Dame. You know at first, when I first moved here to South Bend, every time I see a Mexican, I would honk, because you don't see too many Mexicans so I now, shit I can talk to everybody. It was just a lot of fun throughout the years you know. We would go down in history. I would say Ally Park will go down in history someday that they had the most Mexican workers of all time, back in the 70s. You know and people you might interview down the line that worked for us they worked with me. [inaudible] Armando Rodriguez—there's so many people. There's so many people that worked there: Coco Flores, Castellon. You know and... [inaudible], the police, he became a police officer. He was working with us in the 70s there at Ally. [inaudible] He retired from the police force you know, Tony Garcia—that's another one we don't talk to. He's part of history, in South Bend... Mr. and Mrs. [inaudible]. Ruben Cavazos, First Source Bank, he says give him a call. He could tell you more about my history.

1:14:29 But all I'm saying is all the things I had done for my people, I never wanted nothing, no credit or...they owe me something—no because we're here to help people. Because when I came to South Bend, nobody helped me. There was no—the door was closed. I- I remember going to Ally, I called a couple times. And, and I was lucky that the guy who answered the phones I said 'look my name is Rene Saenz and this is my third application I put there. I got my brothers to support my mother and father ain't working. I need a job. I'll take anything- anything you got.' He said, "What's your name, sir?" I said 'Rene Saenz.' He said 'you know what? Why don't you come down right now? We will look for that application. I think maybe the security guard threw those applications down, because sometimes security will just, you get up against a security guard and- his buddy he'll get his buddy and...' So, I was glad that Mr. Meyer called me, and he got me the job. Mr. Meyer, he hired me on the spot, so I started working there

when I was 19. Not knowing that maybe God put me there for a reason because he knew I was gonna open the door for other Mexicans. I mean, not only Mexicans, also Tex-Mex, even black guys got a job there. Even now when I see them on the street they remember and say 'hey, Rene' you know. You know, it was just a lot of fun working for Ally. We had a lot of walk out strikes here because sometimes we had walkouts... you know. I'm in the Tribune. They got [inaudible] in the tribune. We had a walk out strike one time—couple of times.

1:16:02 And... I got fired for a time there, especially the day when my brother got cancer and I went to personnel and they told me they said well we cannot keep you I said my brother is dying I got to go see him. And they told me well it's either your job or your brother. So, I said you know what, my brother comes first. So, they fired me. I was gone, I buried my brother and I came back, and they fired me... And then two weeks they kept calling my phone. I didn't want to go back to work because I was still with my brothers you know. But they called me back and they... said we're sorry and they paid me back my two weeks. I didn't fight it. The union knew that I left for a good cause, to bury my brother. But the lady there, she was a bitch. She didn't care. She had no feelings. But I was blessed that they called me back, you know. But there's a lot of things in life that... we always... that... when you're growing up it's not going to happen. But life goes for you like a dream, it's so fast.

1:17:00 But I tell you, it was the best thing that I brought my family out of Texas. I think we would have died there. You know at one point when my father and mother was so sick, my other uncle and my grandmother Saenz they wanted to-to take us. And... they wanted to take father... they wanted to-to take care of my father and they wanted to give us up to the welfare, so that the welfare would get us separated. And I said no, that's not gonna happen. You know, we fought for that. And I kept the family you know, together. So, I worked. I just worked. I didn't care that I will 11 years old. So, it's funny when you see a little kid. But my size was always, good because of my size. You know I was always you know 150, at an early age. You know God made me for a reason, I guess. So, when I worked in the fields, they didn't ask how old I was, they didn't care. They knew I had to work, and everything went to my family. [inaudible] because if it because of that, you wouldn't have been born. Because in the 60s our family was gonna disappear, you know but I fought for it and I'm proud I did because I would never see [inaudible]

1:18:06 There was a family that brought us in, um they were from south, south place. They were Mormons. They would come to our house every day. You know you say we're religious, well at that time the... the only religious

people that would help us was the Mormon people. They would feed us; they would give us food. When we go to the store, they would buy what we needed. They would give us clothes. And... they- they told us [inaudible] [audio interference]. There was two older people. At that time, they had to be in their fifties. As a matter of fact, they gave me a [inaudible] They were singers. [inaudible] So we hopped in the car. [audio interference] And they baptized us. [audio interference] when we came back well, I cried. I said, "why mom? Because what if they would take you away from us?" [inaudible] I said, "no I trust them, I trust those people." Then they brought us back. Because in that time there were a lot of kidnapping. You know they could put us [inaudible] what the heck we knew. We were young, but I trusted in God. And they baptized us, you know. It's part of being Mormon I guess so. So, you're looking at a Mexican Mormon here or whatever.

1:19:36 [inaudible], but at that time I had to do what I had to do to survive. I didn't want to go steal. You know, I didn't steal anything because I could get caught. You know who was gonna take care of my brothers? Who was gonna take care of my mom, she was sick, and my father? You know, so there's a lot of things [inaudible] on a migrant worker, well with my family, that people don't know about because I was [inaudible] but it's just part of my family, my family history. But I did what I had to do for my family. I worked my ass, with all the years I worked in the fields and worked for Ally [inaudible] I worked for 45 years of my life since I was 10 years or 11 years old, I have been working. You know, but I am proud of that and what I had done for my brothers, you know and my mother. They're somewhere looking down at me, I guess. These are all the things that happened to me, you know. I never regret one thing, being a migrant worker. And especially you going to work on grad. I mean, really you know, we're proud of you and I know your father would be proud. Because I know your grandma was proud of you, Alvidio, everybody. I don't know if you remember [inaudible] But... for some reason things happen I don't know why. You know, [inaudible] died, then your father died and familia died. At least they're buried next to each other in Texas. From South Bend to Texas that's a long way. But I'll be buried there someday, I hope not soon but like I said it's just...

1:21:11 It was a lot of fun working in the fields. You know people think that hey, [inaudible] you know it's not easy for you to go out there and work in the fields with those [inaudible] salary decreased. You know some people might work for fun, but I didn't work for fun I had to work for a living. [inaudible] to have a responsibility to your family, you know that you know you have to work if you're sick or not sick you have to work either way. You're not there just for the summer time you're there for life to work in the

fields. You know, especially the time when I did the [inaudible] check, I worked 10 hours 7 days a week picking watermelons. Back in the early 60s. I would give my paycheck to my mom. She bought something for us I don't remember what it was. But it was one of the last times she went to the grocery store, with the money. It was big money back in the day, 70 dollars you know. But as I was saying, working in the fields with tortillas and refried beans potatoes that was the best food I ever tasted. You know... it was a lot of fun... memories, from the 50s and 60s.

[Interview continues with Rene and Roy looking through pictures and talking about individual family members. Without the proper context, this part was deliberately not transcribed.]